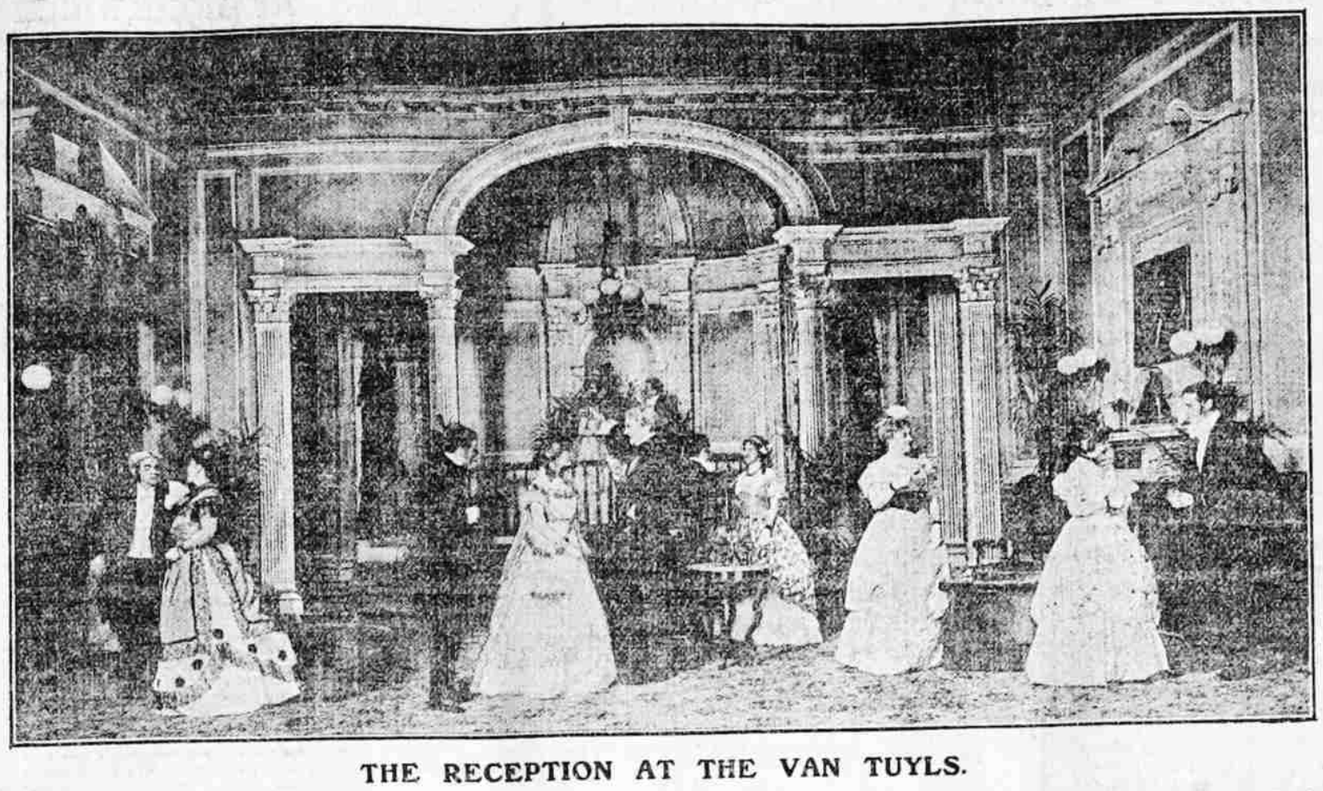
"ROMANCE" TAKES A PAGE FROM THE GAY LIFE OF THE SIXTIES

Stirring Story of a Clergyman Who Loved a Prima Donna And Was Parted From Her.

Remarkable Scene Showing an Apartment In the Old Brevoort House Reproduced.



THE RECEPTION AT THE VAN TUYLS.

IT took Edward Sheldon, the author of "Salvation Nell," "The Nigger," "The Boss" and other plays, to prove that the spirit of romance still lives. Grandmothers and grandfathers of today, especially those of New York, will recall the old Brevoort House, which at one time was peopled with the rich and gay of the world. With that magic power which may be described more accurately by the word imagination Mr. Sheldon has made the ghosts of those early days come to life.

To be sure, they are dressed in their old clothes of the artificial style of the sixties, with loose trousers for the men, full bulging petticoats for the women and other fanciful eccentricities of dress that we recall as children in the pages of the old bound volumes of Godey's Lady's Book. Mr. Sheldon has done this in his latest play, "Romance," which is now enjoying much prosperity in New York. One of the scenes, by the way, is laid in an apartment of the old Brevoort House, and this scene has been reproduced in every particular from a room at the hotel. Like all the plays by Mr. Sheldon, "Romance" is strong medicine. Whatever may be his faults as a playwright, he at least justifies himself by always presenting an interesting story and building up some big climax.

When "Romance" begins the audience sees first Bishop Armstrong, with his little niece endeavoring to amuse him, while there floats through the windows the racket and noise of the New Year's crowd. This young girl's brother is in love. It happens that his sweetheart is an actress, an artist the young girl describes her, with the explanation that there may be more kinds of artists than one.

Her conversation is only preliminary to the arrival of the young man, who has come to make his appeal for the consent of his Episcopal uncle to his marriage. The bishop listens to the young man's declaration of love for the fascinating actress he has asked to be his wife.

Somewhat hindered by his rheumatism, the bishop crosses to his desk to show this impetuous lover a memento of old times, some faded white violets which have lost their perfume, but are still strong in memories for the old man. They are souvenirs of the love which he once felt for a beautiful singer, La Cavallini. Nobody would suspect the serious bishop of ever having indulged in such a love affair, but he starts to tell his secrets to the nephew as the curtain falls on the prologue and blots from view the figure of the young man and the old one.

In the next scene an old fashioned drawing room on Fifth avenue forms a background for figures quaintly dressed in the fashion of the sixties. Full gauze skirts are decked with garlands of artificial flowers. Dress trousers are loose and baggy and velvet collars adorn the coats. The banker, Cornelius Van Tuyl, is giving a party. All New York of that day is present. It is La Cavallini, however, the reigning favorite of the opera company at the Academy of Music, who is to be the center of attraction and admiration. She is not coming as an artist, but as the banker's guest.

This unconventional honor to an opera singer does not pass without comment. The young rector of St. Giles' church, Thomas Armstrong, has come to the party from one of the meetings of the young men's clubs of his parish. He is somewhat disarranged as to his dress, since he is just from a bout in the parish athletic club. He does not fail to hear the innuendoes against the host, which Cornelius Van Tuyl's guests make with their characteristic freedom under such circumstances. He reproaches vigorously one young cub of society who discusses with particular frankness the relations said to exist between the singer and her host. The banker, hearing none of this, but not ignorant of the feelings of his guests, receives them all suavely. When they have gone down to supper by means of the staircase descending from the old colonial columns he awaits to receive La Cavallini.

THE MEETING AT TWILIGHT.

It is not long before their love story is made plain to the audience. They have met before in Italy, in Paris and on the azure coast, where in the beautiful villa called Millefleurs the two had frequently been together before La Cavallini ever thought of coming to the cold and disagreeable New York, which she hates so much. There is a difference of many years in their ages, and she is not yet willing to accept the permission he gives her to find her love wherever else she may want to.

"Love comes in the morning," she concludes in telling him her story of the first passion she ever knew as a young girl in Venice. This episode in her heart's history had brought her at first despair and, finally, resignation and rebellion against the laws of the world.

It is when her protector leaves her alone that the meeting between her and Thomas Armstrong, which is to play such a part in her career, takes place. When the act has come to an end their interest in each other has so far progressed that their inevitable affection for each other is evident to the audience.

Just how the young clergyman's interest in this singer is manifested the beginning of the second act reveals. It passes in the drawing room of the rectory, where he makes his home with his aunt. When the act begins Mr. Van Tuyl, the banker, is there, as he is a vestryman and one of the leaders in the affairs of St. Giles' parish. When La Cavallini is announced to pay her respects to Miss Armstrong there is a distinct chill in the atmosphere. It is not dispelled by the knowledge that a beautiful bouquet of roses standing on the table was sent by La Cavallini to Miss Armstrong. When the spinster leaves the room with the announcement to Mr. Van Tuyl that tea will be served upstairs, and, with no evident intention of including her foreign visitor in the invitation, the clergyman returns to find his beautiful guest.

She is radiant in an old fashioned velvet gown, with a cloak and hat of ermine and her pet monkey in her arms.

"Adelina is her name," she answers to the question of the rector. "I call her that because she looks just like Patti in 'La Traviata.'"

This characteristic exhibition of prima donna spirit is followed by another conversation which illustrates the volatile character of the heroine. Outside the window is heard the music of a piano organ. She looks out. There is one of her compatriots and on the top of the organ is the inevitable monkey. So her own particular monkey must have the pleasure of making the acquaintance at a distance of the chattering animal in the street. Then La Cavallini darts to the chair in which she has placed the beast, clutches it in her arms and, protecting herself with the window curtain from the draft that blows in, shows her monkey to the Italian outside. She has learned that the name of this particular monkey is Tomaso.

"You see," she says laughingly to her ecclesiastical lover, who regards these proceedings with some astonishment, "the monkey has the same name as you."

It was only a few moments before that she had come to understand that her lover's name was Thomas. His curiosity as to her interest in the Italian and the monkey is so great that he asks her after awhile why she took so much interest in them.

"Because," La Cavallini says, "we are both musicians."

After awhile the clergyman who has made her realize that he desires her for his wife recalls his mother at the piano playing "Annie Laurie," which was her favorite song, and when the lights are lit—they are candles in branches resting on the corners of the square piano of that period—she plays the old melody. Out of a box of souvenirs he takes a string of pearls. They are for the woman who is to be his wife. They were his mother's, and they should be hers, and he tells her that were his mother there to see her she would find no one worthier of the present possession of her old treasures than the beautiful singer who is to become her son's wife.

Then the note of tragedy enters the play. Try as he may, Armstrong cannot suppress the doubts awakened by the conversation at Van Tuyl's party. Can it be that there is something between these two?

Was that positive talk about the villa on the shores of the Mediterranean merely ill natured innuendo. In other words, had La Cavallini ever been the mistress of Cornelius Van Tuyl, the man with whom he must be thrown in daily contact? These doubts were overwhelmingly disturbing to the lover.

The woman met his half questioning observations with frankness. There seemed to be the light of truth in her eyes when she denied that the breath of scandal could now justly name her and Van Tuyl together, but the relentless question kept at the lover's consciousness. He could not without the fullest knowledge of the facts from both of them make this woman his wife. It was the return of Van Tuyl which made possible the settlement of their relations.

By degrees the truth comes out. The woman in her desire to hold the love of Armstrong has lied about her present life. She has confessed to him frankly the episodes of her earlier and more or less reckless career, but she has denied that there is at present anything between her and Van Tuyl. When the latter is compelled to confess that their relations are still what society has called them La Cavallini crosses the study, looks in the glass on the mantel and takes off the pearls which her lover has given her. Then he declares that marriage between them can never be. He is left weeping while she and Van Tuyl leave the house.

The last act passes in the apartments of La Cavallini at the Brevoort House. She has made her last appearance at the opera and is to leave for Europe the next day. Her lover has wandered about ever since their parting in the afternoon. He is inflamed with the desire to reform the woman whom he loves, and he determines to go to her hotel and have a final meeting with her.

In a characteristic scene in her apartments her old duenna, a prima donna of an earlier period, prepares supper for her. There is a polyglot assemblage in this act speaking French, German and Italian and deepening the cosmopolitan note which is so strong in the drama. When La Cavallini returns from the opera she is accompanied by Van Tuyl, but she is finished with him. In one of the best scenes of Mr. Sheldon's play she dismisses him forever.

Her life with Van Tuyl has now come to an end, since it has cost too high a price. She has lost a lover she valued more than any other she had known. He left her because she was the mistress of Van Tuyl. So their relations must end. Van Tuyl has scarcely gone when Armstrong enters.

His desire to reform this woman and make her as pure as he thinks she can be is the cause of his visit. He wants her to pray, to repent and be what she could be. Gradually his affection for her overcomes his desire for her spiritual regeneration. At the touch of her body his thoughts of her soul vanish. He no longer seeks to purify her nature, but to possess her for himself.

Here the greater nobility of the woman's nature asserts itself. She repulses him; love him as much as she may, her affection is spiritual and not physical. The note of his declaration to her is frankly brutal. She is, however, selfpossessed and determined, so that when he leaves La Cavallini she is innocent of all wrongdoing with him.

Thus the drama ends, but the epilogue remains. The bishop is still advising his nephew when his niece reads from an evening paper a telegram concerning the death of La Cavallini, "once a noted prima donna, who sang in America and soon after retired from the stage and settled in Italy." The nephew has listened to the recital which has been acted before the eyes of the audience. The bishop has not succeeded in dissuading him from marriage with the girl he loves. The woes of La Cavallini succeed in making no impression on the youthful lover, so when he declines to take the advice offered the bishop consents to perform the ceremony himself.

Old New York scenes have never been more successfully utilized except in Clyde Fitch's "Captain Jinks," as the investiture of a love story, which also had a prima donna for its heroine, although she happened to be an American singer, but that made no attempt to combine the old and the new, as does this successful play.

"I wrote the scenario of 'Romance' three or four years ago," said Mr. Sheldon to a reporter, "and then put it away in a drawer and didn't think of it again until last year. I believe, though, that in writing plays much of the work is done in one's subconscious mind. An idea cooks for years on the back of the stove. One ends by extracting all the flavor possible, considering the limitations of the fire. Anyway, I was glad when I sat down to write 'Romance' that I had not gone into it as soon as I finished the scenario.

"Setting the play in the sixties by means of a prologue and epilogue served to enable me to throw on it the mellow light the story needed. Things are apt to seem more tender, more wistful, somehow, if they exist as memories, with all the hard notes softened down. I wanted to paraphrase an old nursery rime and put it on the program, 'My thoughts at the end of the long, long day fly over the hills and far away,' but evidently some one did not like the idea, because it never happened.

"Then, too, when a story has its abiding place in an old man's mind you can idealize it, just as he certainly would do. The women can seem a little bit more gracious than they are in life, and the men a little more gallant. That is why I tried to make La Cavallini float through the play with her feet just off the ground—a memory, a ghost, an enchanted fragrance trailing from the long ago.

CAVALLINI CALLS ON THE PASTOR.

"I hope people will not think it is a sad play. Tom could never have married La Cavallini. The golden nightingale could never have settled down as chatelaine of the Eighth street rectory. Perhaps Tom wouldn't have loved her quite so much if he had believed she could.

"And when he grew to be a wise and tried old man I am sure he agreed with another man in another play who said:

"'Beautiful things that can't last, that break your heart when they die, and yet you wouldn't want them to live on—that's Romance.'"